



Lotus flower in full bloom, July 21, 1923.

A SEED ANALYST & HIS CAMERA

FROM HORSESHOE CRABS TO NIGHT-BLOOMING CEREUS, FROM OYSTER HARVESTS TO MIGRANT WORKERS, UNOFFICIAL STATE PHOTOGRAPHER ROYDON HAMMOND'S IMAGES ON GLASS FROM THE EARLY 1900S ARE A RICH RESOURCE FOR NATURALISTS AND HISTORIANS.

BY PETER F. SLAVIN AND TIMOTHY A. SLAVIN

Roydon Hammond was a State of Delaware seed analyst from 1922 to 1938. His legacy is still being felt.

Hammond's work for the Board of Agriculture required him to take photographs of seeds, plants, crops and other natural resources at a time when photography was typically limited to portraits of well-to-do families. He worked quietly out of

the Board of Agriculture building, then located on The Green in Dover. Among the scientific images Hammond created were pictures of stainless steel incubators, award-winning chicken breeds, and championship corn. Ironically, he never took his own photograph.

The product of Hammond's toil is a collection of more than 2,000 glass plate

negatives which are now housed in the Delaware Public Archives.

Serendipity also helped Hammond. His employer, the Board of Agriculture, was also responsible for the Bureau of Markets, which promoted economic development in Delaware at the time. As Delaware pushed to market itself across the world in the 1920s and 1930s, the

need for photographs was born. The result was a newfound role for Hammond: in addition to being a seed analyst, he also became the de-facto and unofficial state photographer. And Hammond had an unlikely partner in his new role—then state archivist Leon deValinger. DeValinger was hired to write articles on Delaware's history for a new tourism magazine being published by the state, and Hammond became his sidekick, touring the state and taking photographs of various events and sites.

The collection provides a fascinating cross-section of early 20th century Delaware. Images of seeds and plants are mixed with shots of 4-H fairs, parades and festivals, and many photographs of the agricultural and farm life in Delaware. Special events at the State House on The Green would catch Hammond's eye, as would scenes of truckloads of produce arriving in Dover during the harvest season, bathers at Bethany Beach, and poignant portraits of migrant workers at apple farms outside of Dover.

The value of the collection to historians has been enormous. Photographs taken by Hammond have appeared in a wide variety of publications, including photographic histories, academic and scientific journals, and newspaper and magazine articles. Researchers have used the collection to tell the history of places—the collection is rich in images from Kent and Sussex counties—but also in the telling of natural history. A recent article on the history of the horseshoe crab harvests of the 1920s included one of Hammond's images, with horseshoe crabs stacked six feet high on the banks of Bowers Beach.

Hammond's photographs also provide an untapped opportunity for researchers and naturalists in Delaware. His photographs of plants and wildlife, both in the studio and in the wild, exhibit extraordinary vision and clarity. The composition of his photographs is precise and purposeful; Hammond is both artist and scientist. His photograph of a lotus flower, for example, is captured with the balanced lighting of a studio artist. Not content to rely on a single image created in a studio, Hammond then hand-carried his equipment onto a boat and captured photographs of a native lotus

bed in Silver Lake in Dover. When asked to document Delaware's prolific fishing industry, Hammond not only boarded the Oyster Vessel Doris, but also sailed out into the bay and caught action photographs of the dredges unloading the catch onto the deck. His photograph of the crew stands as one of his finest portraits among the collection. Back home in the studio, Hammond again painstakingly photographed the different variety of oysters harvested.

Other challenges were met. Hammond successfully photographed the tricky night-blooming cereus plant; his lighting



Apple blossoms in laboratory, April 27, 1925.



Lotus bed near Dover, July 20, 1923.

on the plant had to be very brief to avoid spoilage of the blossom. He also captured "Betty" on film. Betty was a Chesapeake retriever and her portrait includes a classic pose of retriever with waterfowl in mouth. Another shot of a quail's nest with seventeen eggs appears to have been taken deep in a woods.

How Hammond practiced his trade is left to our imaginations. His equipment at the time was likely heavy and cumbersome to transport. The film he used – gelatin-based glass plates – was inherently difficult to use and handle, let alone to transport to field locations. Once produced, the negatives were bulky and required careful storage.

Today, the Delaware Public Archives holds more than 200,000 photographic



Night-blooming Cereus, August 24, 1923.



Above, King Crab harvest near Bowers Beach, June 17, 1924. At right, crew of the Oyster Schooner "Doris", April 29, 1924.

the images are the result of composite collections—photographs from World War II, for example, are drawn from myriad sources and numerous photographers. Hammond's photographs stand alone because they are the work of a single photographer, with a single vision, over time. As such, the collection has a unique appeal.

Hammond is, rightfully, Delaware's foremost documentary photographer. Like the Civil War photographs of Matthew Brady, and the turn-of-the-century photographs of Jacob Riis, Hammond's work stands alone in Delaware's photographic history.

Photographic collections such as this provide untold value to an archives collection. The eye of the photographer is captured, and gives clues to the past through the composition of images, the subject matter, or people who appear in the photograph. The images provide a clear documentary purpose, like documenting the extent of Delaware's agriculture industry, for example. But the images also provide other historical evidence: the photographs include buildings, cars, automobiles, clothing and fashion, and other clues that historians rely on to tell and re-tell their stories.

Like so many artists who are under-appreciated during their lifetime, Hammond received little recognition for his work. Despite his keen eye and scientific skill, his service to the state ended abruptly in the

1930s, when a change in administration resulted in the loss of his job at the Department of Agriculture. Then state archivist Leon deValinger once recalled that Hammond remained unemployed before moving to Washington and taking a position with the American Automobile Association. Hammond fell out of contact with deValinger and was not heard from after the move to Washington. DeValinger made sure that the negatives were transferred to the Archives, however.

History makes heroes out of the late and great. But it should also make heroes out of dutiful public servants like Roydon Hammond. His vision and skill resulted in one of the finest collections in the Delaware Public Archives, and another intriguing story in Delaware's history.

His legacy to Delaware is not so much as a seed analyst for the Department of Agriculture, but as one of its first, and arguably finest, photographers of the early 20th century. His work in documenting Delaware's social and natural history remains available for a new generation of scientists, scholars, researchers, and history buffs. And his images—once taken on unwieldy equipment and maintained anonymously in a state office in Dover—are now available across the world via the internet.

Roydon Hammond's legacy is now available for a new generation of Delawareans. **OD**



ABOUT GLASS PLATE NEGATIVES

Glass-plate negatives like those used by Roydon Hammond are fragile and unstable. The negatives are approximately four inches by five inches and have to be stored vertically to avoid the deterioration of the emulsion on the glass.

Glass-plate negatives from the early 20th century were typically produced using a dry-plate technique; the glass was pre-coated in a factory to allow for greater chemical sensitivity to light over time.

A persistent preservation concern is the degradation of the emulsion on the plate; when this occurs, the image flakes off of the glass-plate and is lost forever. The Delaware Public Archives, which has micro-filmed the entire collection of Hammond's photographs, requires researchers to use the microfilm version.

The Archives has digitized more than 500 of Hammond's photographs and published them to its web site at www.archives.state.de.us.

PETER F. SLAVIN IS AN AUTHOR, HISTORIAN, AND AVID USER OF DELAWARE'S STATE PARKS. HIS BROTHER, TIMOTHY A. SLAVIN, IS CASE DIRECTOR OF THE DELAWARE PUBLIC ARCHIVES.